

Nautical Homes: Indulging a Passion Without Going Overboard

Real-estate agents say too much of a marine theme can shipwreck sales; a ‘Titanic café’



The contemporary home of California architect Martin Tarafdar, which he dubbed the ‘Shipwreck House.’

MICHELLE DREWES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Chad Floyd’s voice rises in excitement when he starts talking about boats.

His home on the Connecticut River is designed to resemble the wooden steamboats that once traveled the Mississippi. Large beams in the living room evoke steel trusses, while the louvered doors “are the kind you would have found in the 19th century on one of these vessels,” said Mr. Floyd, a 73-year-old architect.

There's something about water and boating that stirs the passions. The nautical theme is having a moment with homeowners, who are finding unusual ways to bring a marine flavor into their homes.

Paulo Da Silva's roughly 26,000-square-foot home outside Johannesburg has porthole-like windows and its own 50-foot lighthouse that flashes seven different colors.



Beams in the living room of the Floyds' home on the Connecticut River are intended to evoke metal trusses used on steamboats. PHOTO: JULIE BIDWELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"I've always loved the sea," said Mr. Da Silva, 49, a native South African who as a child often visited Portugal's coast. "When I hear the water, it just calms me down."

Michael Garvey, a New York City interior designer who often works on nautically themed projects in Connecticut and the Hamptons, said many people also associate boating, and especially yachts, with an upscale lifestyle. He noted that shiplap—a style of wooden siding similar in appearance to planks used in boats—is currently "huge" in home design.

Real-estate professionals, however, warn homeowners not to go overboard. The more unusual a home is, [the harder it is to sell](#).

Nautical home design “can feel like a theme park in a split second,” said Mr. Garvey.

But for some nautical buffs, resale value is beside the point.



Paulo Da Silva’s home in Johannesburg has a shipwreck-themed swimming pool. PHOTO: CHAS EVERITT INTERNATIONAL / LUXURY PORTFOLIO INTERNATIONAL

Mr. Da Silva’s Johannesburg house has a shipwreck-themed swimming pool and a “Titanic Café” with a sushi bar and a large built-in fish tank. For the master bedroom wall, Mr. Da Silva, who is retired from the steel industry, commissioned a stainless steel and glass model of the sinking Titanic, which lights up and even puffs mist out its smokestacks.

Mr. Da Silva says it took him about four years and roughly \$2 million to build the house, which was completed in 2004. “I tried to create a Hollywood-fantasy type of thing that nobody had,” he said.



But with his children now grown, he put the home on the market in 2016 for about \$4 million. He recently raised the price to \$4.8 million. He acknowledges that the home's nautical theme may make it more difficult to sell, but believes the right buyer will come along.

"This isn't everybody's cup of tea," said California architect Martin Tarafdar, owner of a contemporary home he dubbed the "Shipwreck House," which has three bedrooms plus a guesthouse. He first put it on the market three years ago for \$3.8 million; in November,

he relisted it with a new agent, Cliff Keith of Today Sotheby's International Realty, for \$2,999,999.

Mr. Tarafdar says the home's design was inspired by the location in Newcastle, Calif., about two hours outside San Francisco. Looking at the 1-acre parcel perched in the hills overlooking Folsom Lake, "I just envisioned a ship up against the rocks," he said.

Above a wave-shaped roof, three mast-like iron columns are topped with rectangular solar panels to suggest sails. Inside, Mr. Tarafdar sprayed the raw concrete floor with blue stain to give it a "flooded" look.

Mr. Tarafdar, 62, said building the house became "an obsession." By the time it was completed in 2015, he had divorced and now, he said, "It's way too much house."

He knows it is "a hard sell," but says the project "overrode every logical thought process." He said: "I knew going in I might not make anything on it."

Mr. Keith said he hasn't received any offers, though the home's ship-like appearance has attracted plenty of free publicity. He is taking a nontraditional marketing approach, targeting buyers across the country and overseas. "It's going to take a unique person who's going to see it and say I want that," the agent said.

For the Floyds, it was important that their riverfront home in Essex, Conn., not feel "gimmicky," said Brenda Floyd, 67, an artist.

As visitors approach the house on a narrow bluestone walkway, the side-by-side garage and guesthouse evoke wharves, with the house a vessel about to set sail.

But the home also has elements that aren't at all nautical, such as the living room's high cathedral ceiling and fireplace. The couple, who are downsizing to a smaller home in town, listed the house a few weeks ago for \$2.15 million.

Mr. Floyd compared a nautical theme for a home to seasoning food. "You can put too much on, and blow it."



A bluestone walkway leads up to the Floyds' home in Essex, Conn. The side-by-side garage and guesthouse suggest wharves. PHOTO: JULIE BIDWELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL